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Comprehensive review of the existing institutional framework for the system-wide evaluation of operational activities for development of the United Nations system

Note by the Secretary-General*

1. The General Assembly, in its resolution 64/289, requested me to commission a comprehensive review of the existing institutional framework for the system-wide evaluation of operational activities for development of the United Nations system and to submit to the General Assembly a report, with recommendations, at its sixty-sixth session. Furthermore, the Assembly requested that I commission the review in consultation with the Joint Inspection Unit and the United Nations Evaluation Group. The comprehensive review forms part of the broader discussion on initiatives to improve system-wide coherence in the United Nations. Importantly, the Assembly, recognizing the current multi-tiered evaluation system in the United Nations, affirmed the importance of fully utilizing and strengthening the existing institutional framework and capacities. I appointed two international evaluation experts, Angela Bester (South Africa) and Charles Lusthaus (Canada), to conduct the review. A reference group comprising members from the Joint Inspection Unit, the Department of Economic and Social Affairs, the Office of Internal Oversight Services, the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs and the United Nations Evaluation Group ably guided the review process from its inception to the finalization of the report, and I greatly appreciate their contribution.

2. The experts did not merely review the existing institutional framework and capacities for system-wide evaluation. Instead, I asked that the review be future oriented and that it address the central question of how the United Nations can improve the existing mechanisms in order to provide system-wide evaluations, which are independent, credible and useful in assisting the United Nations system to respond to the strategic priorities and operational issues or questions facing it. The review team consulted widely, obtaining the views of Member States, senior management, evaluation units and the international evaluation community.

* The delay in the submission of the present report was due to the need for extensive consultations with Member States and United Nations entities.

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3. I am pleased to transmit to Member States a summary of the report of the independent experts.[1] It explores the demand for and use of independent system-wide evaluation as well as the existing institutional framework and the Organization's capacity to manage, conduct and contribute to such evaluation. Drawing on lessons learned from past and current system-wide evaluations in the United Nations system as well as experiences from other multilateral institutions, the report usefully distils the characteristics of effective system-wide evaluation in the current context.

4. I have found the report to be balanced in its conclusions and forthright about the wide range of gaps in the existing system-wide evaluation mechanisms. The experts found, among other things, that system-wide evaluation is taking place in various forms and on an ad hoc basis, that there is a demand for independent system-wide evaluation and that some useful reports have been produced. It is gratifying to learn that United Nations organizations are working to create an environment conducive to effective evaluation and aspire to meet the norms and standards of evaluation as espoused by the United Nations Evaluation Group. The experts conclude, however, that the lack of coordination, limited policy guidance and the absence of a clear strategy for independent system-wide evaluation has prevented this valuable tool from fulfilling its potential to explain to a global audience the effectiveness, efficiency, relevance and impact of United Nations activities. I have noted the findings on human and financial resource constraints faced by a number of evaluation units of the United Nations and the review team's conclusion that very little has been consciously invested in building the institutional and organizational capacity to improve the system-wide evaluation function in the United Nations.

5. It has been the view of the General Assembly that the development agenda and development results must be nationally owned, and it therefore follows that independent system-wide evaluation at the country level, as demonstrated by the "Delivering as one" country-led evaluations, will assume increasing importance in the future. So, while addressing the issues of evaluation capacity in the United Nations system, we should also attend to developing national evaluation capacity.

6. The experts astutely observe that the issues raised are not new and that attempts to address the issues have been fraught with difficulty. They argue that past approaches to addressing the issue from a structural viewpoint, for example, proposing the creation of a new unit, have been politicized and have failed to advance the cause of independent system-wide evaluation. I am heartened by the review team's conclusion that there is a willingness within the United Nations to have substantive discussions and dialogue on independent system-wide evaluation. It is this willingness to engage in a dialogue that underpins the six recommendations of the review team. I appreciate the pragmatic approach taken by the team, focusing attention on what actions are possible and the importance of an open and honest discussion to move things forward. Furthermore, the recommendations are presented as actions that can be achieved in the short term (within the first two years) and recommendations with actions that require a longer time frame.

7. The team has done well in navigating the technical and political complexities of the review; I commend the report, including its recommendations, to Member States for their consideration. Some of the recommendations are addressed to me in my capacity as Secretary-General. I will examine these closely and, in consultation

[1] The full report can be found, in English only at www.un.org/esa/coordination/pdf/iswe_final_report_march_2012.pdf.

with senior colleagues in the United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination, will determine the actions to be taken. I fully support the approach of building on and strengthening the existing mechanisms. The recommendation that I establish a process for strengthening the coordination of existing independent system-wide evaluation activities and set up an interim coordination mechanism for managing the process is a practical step towards strengthening that which already exists. I have requested the reference group for the review to submit proposals to me on how to proceed with the implementation of this recommendation. I expect the reference group to draw on the many valuable suggestions contained in the report and to consult their peers in the United Nations evaluation community in drawing up the proposals. System-wide evaluations are taking place currently, and it is imperative that their coordination be strengthened. We can no longer afford an ad hoc approach to system-wide evaluation — such an approach is inefficient, ineffective and unsustainable. With regard to the recommendation on improving the quality of system-wide policy-focused evaluations, there is certainly merit in examining how the quadrennial comprehensive policy review can be made more effective and useful for Member States and United Nations system entities. There is no doubt that it is necessary to develop specific standards, guidance and competencies for system-wide evaluation, and I intend to engage the United Nations Evaluation Group to facilitate this work, as recommended by the experts.

8. The recommendations addressed to me as Secretary-General will have limited impact if implemented on their own; they must be seen as an integral part of the package of recommendations made by the experts. I therefore urge Member States to deliberate thoroughly on the entire set of recommendations. In this regard, the recommendation, that the General Assembly put in motion an intergovernmental process to deal with the strategic questions confronting independent system-wide evaluation (for example what Member States want to achieve through independent system-wide evaluation) is pivotal. The experts affirm that the Joint Inspection Unit is the only entity with a specific mandate for independent system-wide evaluation and acknowledge the reforms initiated by the Unit. The recommendation regarding the Joint Inspection Unit is in keeping with the principle of strengthening existing mechanisms, and I am encouraged by the willingness of the Unit to explore new and innovative ways of carrying out its mandate.

9. The United Nations system entities and I, as Secretary-General, are ready to support Member States in the implementation of the recommendations. I encourage Member States to engage in an open and frank discussion on the report, including its recommendations, and build on the positive discussions held during the review process to have a substantial dialogue on this important issue. Evaluation is an essential element of our focus on results and in our drive to improve development outcomes. Credible and effective independent system-wide evaluation is not optional in the current climate, where there are increasing demands on the United Nations to be efficient, transparent and accountable. Importantly, there are also increasing demands that the United Nations system demonstrate that it adds value at the country, regional and global levels. Independent system-wide evaluation has the potential to build confidence in the United Nations system's ability to make a lasting and positive change in the lives of millions of people. Finally, the full report provides 10 characteristics of effective independent system-wide evaluation, and it is my hope that we will all work together to make these characteristics a reality within the United Nations system.

Summary of the report of independent experts on their review of the institutional framework for the system-wide evaluation of operational activities for development of the United Nations system

Introduction

1. Over the past few years, strengthening the capacity for the system-wide evaluation of the work of the United Nations system at the country and global levels has been the subject of significant debate, both between Governments on the international stage and among United Nations entities themselves.

2. Recent resolutions adopted by the General Assembly demonstrate that system-wide evaluation is becoming a growing concern for Member States. For instance, the General Assembly, in its resolution 59/250 on the triennial comprehensive policy review of operational activities for development of the United Nations system, encouraged the systematic use of monitoring and evaluation approaches at the system-wide level and the promotion of collaborative approaches to evaluation, including joint evaluations. Subsequently, in resolution 62/208, the Assembly requested the United Nations development system to further develop guidance and oversight mechanisms for the funding, planning and implementation of the monitoring and evaluation of United Nations Development Assistance Frameworks, with a view to assessing their contribution to national development and the achievement of the internationally agreed development goals, including the Millennium Development Goals. More recently, in resolution 64/289, the Assembly requested the Secretary-General, in consultation with the United Nations Evaluation Group and the Joint Inspection Unit, to commission a comprehensive review of the existing institutional framework for the system-wide evaluation of operational activities for development of the United Nations system and to submit a report, with recommendations, to the Assembly at its sixty-sixth session.

3. In June 2011, the Office of the Deputy Secretary-General, in accordance with General Assembly resolution 64/289, contracted two independent reviewers (one from South Africa and the other from Canada) to conduct a comprehensive review of the existing institutional framework for system-wide evaluation of operational activities for development at the United Nations. The review was expected to provide recommendations to Member States on how to further strengthen the system-wide evaluation function in the work of the Organization. The proposed improvements are aimed at the reinforcement and full utilization of the existing institutional framework and capacities.

4. Five questions guided the review (four of which were elaborated in the terms of reference and one of which was developed during the review team's inception mission):

(a) What is the demand for independent system-wide evaluation, and how would it be used?

(b) What constitutes a good independent system-wide evaluation and what kind of mandates and capacities would be required to conduct one?

(c) What is the existing capacity to manage, conduct and contribute to an independent system-wide evaluation (based on past experience)?

(d) How could the United Nations system address capacity gaps in independent system-wide evaluation in the future, building on existing mechanisms?

(e) What is the present institutional framework for system-wide evaluation of operational activities for development?

5. The scope of the review, as set out in the terms of reference, was to consider system-wide evaluation for operational activities for development, defined as those activities of funds, programmes and agencies which have the specific objective of promoting development. A number of United Nations entities have specific mandates in that regard. Operational activities for development cover both longer-term development-related activities and activities with a humanitarian assistance focus.

Methodology

6. The review was not meant to assess the effectiveness or efficiency of independent system-wide evaluation in the United Nations system at present. Instead, it followed the methodology of a prospective evaluation, an uncommon type in which evaluative techniques are used to provide direction for the future. They generate useful information and recommendations that help both those who govern and those who manage to gain insight into what could solve a forward-looking question. The review team perceived the basic future-oriented question being raised as the following: How can the United Nations improve independent system-wide evaluation mechanisms in order to provide system-wide evaluations, which are independent, credible and useful, on priority strategic and operational questions or issues facing the United Nations system?

7. A reference group was established comprising representatives from the Joint Inspection Unit, the Department of Economic and Social Affairs and the United Nations Evaluation Group, as well as the evaluation units of the Office of Internal Oversight Services and the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. The role of the reference group was to advise the Office of the Deputy Secretary-General and to facilitate the engagement of United Nations evaluation entities in the review process. It was also envisaged that the United Nations Evaluation Group, as a member of the reference group, would keep its member organizations informed of the progress of the review.

8. The review team employed a range of approaches to gather information. These included conducting an extensive review of documents suggested by the reference group and others, which were available on United Nations websites or found through a search of academic and "grey" literature. The review team examined United Nations system-wide evaluations conducted over the past five years to identify lessons regarding the process of conducting, managing or supporting system-wide evaluation activities. A previous analysis on the question of system-wide evaluation in the United Nations was also considered.

9. In addition, data were collected from United Nations Evaluation Group fact sheets, personal and group interviews, two stakeholder workshops held in October 2011 and a questionnaire sent to evaluation offices in the United Nations regarding their capacity and involvement in system-wide evaluation activities. Both quantitative

and qualitative analyses of the data were used to answer the questions posed in the assessment framework, and the data were triangulated to verify the findings. The review team interviewed members of the United Nations evaluation community (the United Nations Evaluation Group, the Secretariat and agency evaluation offices and the Joint Inspection Unit), as well as potential internal and external users of system-wide evaluations, namely, Member States, delegates serving on the Second and Fifth Committees of the General Assembly and on the Committee for Programme and Coordination and the United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination (CEB). Interviews were conducted in New York and Geneva. In addition, the review team sought the opinions of outside experts. A total of 66 face-to-face interviews and more than 10 telephone interviews were conducted. The draft report was distributed to Member States and the reference group and a validation workshop with those groups (opened by the Deputy Secretary-General and chaired by Ambassador Yusra Khan of Indonesia) was held on 17 February 2012 to consider the findings and recommendations of the review. Written comments, as well as comments made during the workshop, were considered and, where appropriate, have been incorporated into the final report.

Structure of the report

10. The report is structured as follows:

- Chapter 1 provides the background, purpose and scope of the review and sets out the key questions to be answered by the review. It provides details on the methodology used by the review team.
- Chapter 2 describes the context for system-wide evaluation in the United Nations. It briefly outlines the reform issues, including system-wide coherence and the drive to strengthen accountability. The chapter discusses the key United Nations entities involved in managing, coordinating or conducting system-wide evaluations and outlines some of the definitional issues regarding system-wide evaluation.
- Chapter 3 reviews the existing demand for system-wide evaluation in the United Nations system. This demand is broken down into four categories: country focused, strategy/policy focused, theme focused and management/administrative focused. The paucity of data on demand for independent system-wide evaluation and the value of engaging in system-wide evaluations are discussed.
- Chapter 4 explores the institutional framework for independent system-wide evaluation in the United Nations. The lack of existing guidance for the function is demonstrated, and a case is made to more clearly articulate the roles and responsibilities of actors involved in system-wide evaluation. Moreover, the value of independence for system-wide evaluations is discussed.
- Chapter 5 reviews the existing capacity of central evaluation units in the United Nations for managing, conducting or contributing to independent system-wide evaluations. Attention is paid to the lack of guidance and capacity development for system-wide evaluations and to the need for better coordination mechanisms. The limited resources of evaluation units are also identified as a factor constraining participation in system-wide evaluations.

- Chapter 6, based on the information gathered in the review, outlines the characteristics of a good system-wide evaluation as well as the kinds of mandates and capacities it requires. The chapter draws on lessons learned from past and current system-wide evaluations.
- Chapter 7 synthesizes the findings presented in the previous chapters and provides six recommendations to strengthen independent system-wide evaluation in the United Nations.

Main findings

11. The report contains 36 findings that are organized around the five areas of investigation, namely, the context, demand, institutional framework, capacity and desirable characteristics of an independent system-wide evaluation.

Context

12. The current interest in independent system-wide evaluation is to be seen as part of the broader context of reform in the United Nations system. There are increased demands for strengthened accountability and improved impact of the Organization's operations. There is a greater focus on results, as well as a desire for better evaluative reporting and greater value for money invested in the United Nations system.

13. The review found that there is a wide variety of interpretations of what constitutes independent system-wide evaluation. Some view "system-wide" as meaning the entirety of the United Nations, covering the four pillars of its work (development, humanitarian affairs, peace and security, and human rights). Others see it as meaning the evaluation of a theme that cuts across the United Nations system, for example, gender equality. "System-wide" in the humanitarian context covers not only United Nations entities, but also external international relief organizations. Several evaluation units claimed to have participated in system-wide evaluations, mostly on an ad hoc basis. However, the Joint Inspection Unit is the only entity with a substantive mandate to conduct or manage independent system-wide evaluations. Others, such as the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women) and the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, have system-wide mandates pertaining to specific themes, for example, gender equality and humanitarian activities, while the mandate of the Office of Internal Oversight Services is confined to the United Nations Secretariat.

14. United Nations entities are increasingly aware of the need for an enabling environment for evaluation. The United Nations Evaluation Group, although it is a voluntary professional network and not a body established by legislation, plays an important role in promoting an enabling environment for evaluation and for good evaluation practices. It has, on an ad hoc basis, filled the gap in managing system-wide evaluations (for example, the joint South Africa-United Nations Evaluation Group evaluation and the "Delivering as one" evaluability assessment). The gap has persisted, as over the past five years it has been difficult for the United Nations to reach consensus on the institutional and organizational approaches to independent system-wide evaluation.

Demand

15. The different mandates of United Nations entities and different interpretations of what is meant by independent system-wide evaluation complicate the analysis of demand. The review found that demand for evaluation varied depending on how interviewees interpreted the concepts of "system-wide" and "independence". Some interviewees suggested that they were more interested in requesting such evaluations when "system-wide" meant the entire United Nations system. Other interviewees felt that evaluation at the United Nations system level was too cumbersome, while a third group questioned the idea and the assumption that the United Nations should be considered to be a system that could be evaluated.

16. Regardless of the definitional issue and ambivalence on the part of senior managers and Member States towards independent system-wide evaluation, data suggest there is growing interest in and demand for a wide variety of evaluative work that has system-wide characteristics. Four types of demand for independent system-wide evaluation were identified and explored: evaluation studies that focus on United Nations work within a country; evaluation work that deals with United Nations strategies and/or policies; evaluation work that explores United Nations themes implemented by multiple agencies; and evaluation studies of United Nations management practices. These categories can be further subdivided according to whether evaluations focus primarily on strategic or operational work.

17. There is a paucity of systematic data to assess the actual demand for independent system-wide evaluation, except for the data collected by the Joint Inspection Unit through its needs-assessment surveys. Data from the Joint Inspection Unit suggest that demand for independent system-wide evaluation, while erratic, has increased over the past 10 years. Increasingly, requests come from United Nations organizations and oversight bodies, with an emphasis on management and administrative studies. This focus is largely in response to the 2007 triennial comprehensive policy review, which identified system-wide management issues and the need for the harmonization of business practices within the United Nations system. There has been a steady demand for evaluations in the humanitarian sector that are of an inter-agency nature, most of which are country-level operational evaluations. Managers of evaluation units that were surveyed perceive a need for system-wide evaluations that go beyond managerial efficiency issues. While they view the latter as important, they saw the need for system-wide evaluations that dealt with the issues of results and impact.

18. Demand for independent system-wide evaluation at the country level is nascent and can be expected to grow. United Nations Development Assistance Frameworks represent operational activities for development at the country level, and their evaluation became mandatory in January 2010. Programming countries themselves are asking what the contribution of the United Nations system is to their national priorities.

19. It is not surprising that evaluation requests are varied, as the interests of Member States and United Nations organizations are complex. System-wide evaluations are resource intensive, and diverse demands need to be prioritized and coordinated to ensure that the United Nations system derives maximum value from such evaluations. Other than the coordination between the Joint Inspection Unit and the Office of Internal Oversight Services, the United Nations system as a whole does not coordinate demand for independent system-wide evaluation. Prioritization

of requests for such evaluations is not, nor can it be, done system-wide, as there is no overarching strategy to guide prioritization. Questions regarding the purpose of evaluations or what the United Nations wants to achieve through evaluation have not been answered unambiguously by the United Nations system.

Institutional framework

20. The institutional framework (the formal and informal rules) for evaluation in the United Nations has become increasingly clear, with norms and standards, evaluation policies and structural arrangements to institutionalize the evaluation function. This is not the case for independent system-wide evaluation.

21. The institutional criteria for evaluation developed by the United Nations Evaluation Group (with some minor adjustments for independent system-wide evaluation) were used in the review. In addition, institutional issues such as governance and operational institutions were examined. In general, it was found that for independent system-wide evaluation, institutional components such as leadership, policies, structures, norms and values, were ad hoc and weak. Only the Joint Inspection Unit has been given a strong mandate to engage in independent system-wide evaluation work. The study suggests that the role and function of such evaluation is not clear, nor are the expectations. Furthermore, the review suggests that while Member States pay some attention to individual evaluation studies, there is virtually no oversight of the totality of evaluation work being done beyond a single organization. Similarly, while individual units conduct independent system-wide evaluations in areas of concern to them, there is little coordination of this work at the system level. The dearth of mechanisms to coordinate independent system-wide evaluations represents a major gap in the United Nations.

Capacity

22. The existing capacity for independent system-wide evaluation is inadequate. The financial and human resources of most evaluation units in the United Nations system are limited to those required for day-to-day work, and participation in such evaluations is often done without extra resources. Very few entities in the United Nations system have an evaluation expenditure that exceeds 1 per cent of the entity's total expenditure.

23. There is little doubt that the quality of evaluation practitioners in the United Nations system continues to improve, owing in large part to the work of the United Nations Evaluation Group. There is a gap, however, in developing capacity for independent system-wide evaluation. No specific competencies have been identified for evaluation managers and practitioners, and it is assumed that only the normal evaluation competencies are required. Lessons from past independent system-wide evaluations show that this is not the case.

24. Evaluation capacity at the country level is essential for an evaluation to be effective, but an assessment of United Nations Development Assistance Framework evaluations indicates that such capacity is inadequate for independent system-wide evaluation. There are pockets of sufficient capacity in the United Nations system, but other than the United Nations Evaluation Group, there is no structure that has an overview of existing capacity. Furthermore, the United Nations Evaluation Group is a voluntary organization and does not have the resources or the mandate to coordinate capacity.

25. The review was unable to determine accurately the number of evaluations produced in the United Nations system each year, as no single entity has responsibility for collecting that information. From the data available through the United Nations Evaluation Group, evaluation units complete, on average, 10 evaluation reports annually, and more than 300 such reports are completed each year in the United Nations system. Information gathered through interviews and the annual reports of the Joint Inspection Unit suggest that the United Nations system may not have the capacity needed to engage effectively with the recommendations of so many evaluations. Member States have varying capacities to respond to the volume of documentation generated by the United Nations system. The quality of reports produced and the willingness of senior management to act on recommendations are also factors that affect the use of reports.

Desirable characteristics

26. The following 10 characteristics of a good evaluation were identified in the review:

(a) The evaluation mechanisms are independent and credible, and the outputs or products are used. Independence is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for good system-wide evaluation. While independence is a requirement for credible evaluation, the credibility of an evaluation also depends on the quality and integrity of the analysis, the degree of transparency of the evaluation process and the competence and credibility of the evaluators;

(b) It focuses on the key questions that those who govern the Organization want answered to improve the strategic and operational functioning of the United Nations. Increasingly, Member States are asking where and how the United Nations should invest and what should be the balance between country-level investments and investment in global issues. The questions cut across the four pillars of the United Nations system, are normative in many instances and present dilemmas that need articulation and negotiation;

(c) It must be mandated by those who govern the Organization. They must ensure that there is an environment for independent, credible and useful evaluation. The mandate plays a critical role, as the one who mandates the evaluation has implications for how results are fed back into the United Nations system and for who is responsible for acting on the recommendations arising from the evaluation;

(d) Financial and human resources for independent system-wide evaluation should be commensurate with the scope of delivery expected by those who govern and senior management. A significant investment of resources is required to produce high-quality, usable evaluations;

(e) Member States should have the requisite capacity to engage in strategic evaluations. In practice this means that they should have the capacity to articulate the strategic questions they want answered by the evaluations. It also means that the role of Member States should be set out unambiguously in the governance framework for independent system-wide evaluation. Member States also need the time and resources to engage with the results of independent system-wide evaluation;

(f) It has evaluators and evaluation managers who are technically competent to deal with methodological complexities, have good strategic sense and possess political astuteness to negotiate across the institutional, organizational, geographic

and other boundaries involved in system-wide work. Technical evaluation skills by themselves are insufficient, as independent system-wide evaluation is conducted in a political context where stakeholders often have very divergent interests. Evaluation managers in particular require an ability to navigate internal and external politics and excel in advocating the use of the results;

(g) A central quality is the ability to manage the balance between supporting the governors of the Organization in their oversight responsibilities and being useful to senior management. There are also different interests within those groups that must be balanced;

(h) It takes time to develop and institutionalize. The complexity of the United Nations environment suggests that experimentation should be used as a means of testing new structures and processes. Given the present resources, technologies, capacities, context and institutions, the best evaluation approaches are the ones that are able to identify strengths and weaknesses and create the conditions for change. Good independent system-wide evaluation thus needs to be flexible and adaptive to changing circumstances in the United Nations system;

(i) It is one part of a larger system. If it is strengthened, the other components of the system need to be strengthened as well to keep the system in balance. Other components that need to be strengthened include the evaluation capacity of the United Nations system at the country level and national statistical systems. Good independent system-wide evaluation does not operate at the expense of the evaluation functions of individual agencies. In fact, it requires well-resourced and functioning individual evaluation units that can support and contribute to the process;

(j) It pays attention to the human rights and gender equality dimensions of the programmes and activities being evaluated. It also integrates human rights and gender equality into evaluation design, implementation and reporting. It should respond to questions that go to the heart of the United Nations mandate, such as how well human rights and gender equality are incorporated into United Nations policies, programmes and practices.

Conclusions

27. In conclusion, independent system-wide evaluation is occurring in the United Nations system in a wide variety of forms and in many ways. Some evaluation reports have been identified as helpful; others less so. At the operational level, independent system-wide evaluation has suffered from a lack of coordination. This is not surprising, considering that there is little policy guidance and no clear leadership or strategy for such evaluation in the system.

28. There is also little data on the demand for independent system-wide evaluation and little data indicating that trade-offs are being made in choosing which activities to carry out from a system-wide perspective. While the available data suggest that there continues to be a demand for independent system-wide evaluation, there is also reluctance from senior managers and Member States to move ahead in addressing the demand because of concerns related to the current use of evaluation.

29. Furthermore, no clear analysis of financial requirements for doing evaluations has been made and quality control has been ad hoc. In this context, very little has been consciously invested in building the institutional and organizational capacity to

improve the system-wide evaluation function in the United Nations. In fact, when the Organization has tried to tackle the issues, it has approached the problem as a structural rather than a functional one, addressing the role evaluation plays and should play within the United Nations. By addressing evaluation from a structural standpoint (i.e. by creating units or establishing an accountable group), it became politicized, with different groups in the United Nations supporting different structural approaches. The interviews confirm that the politicization of independent system-wide evaluation remains a significant concern even today. Hence, moving problematic issues ahead will not be easy. The experience the review team has had in carrying out the review suggests, however, that there is a willingness in the United Nations system to have substantive discussions on the issue. Interviewees see that continuing the ad hoc approach to independent system-wide evaluation is inefficient and sometimes ineffective, and therefore unsustainable.

30. A wide assortment of gaps deviating from the ideal of independent system-wide evaluation were identified in the review. The issue is which gaps can be addressed to obtain the most gain with the least institutional disruption and the fewest resources. This is congruent with the intent of the terms of reference and is the focus of the review team's recommendations.

Recommendations

31. The approach to formulating the recommendations was shaped by the need to depoliticize independent system-wide evaluation. Consideration was given to what actions were in the realm of the possible and the importance of dialogue in moving the issue forward. The recommendations are structured as actions that can be accomplished in the short term (within the first two years) and that can be done in the medium to long term (three to five years). The responsibility for implementing the recommendations should be under the purview of the General Assembly.

Recommendation 1: The President of the General Assembly should set up a working group to explore the specific function it wants independent system-wide evaluation to play within the United Nations system

32. Independent system-wide evaluation is going on in the United Nations and will continue. It is recommended that it be provided with a firmer institutional footing (rules, standards and mandates), as well as mechanisms to coordinate activity and provide legitimacy for the work undertaken. In addition, it is suggested that system-wide evaluations are not being adequately carried out in the policy and strategic areas and a way forward is proposed.

33. While some operational questions were explored, it was not possible to put in place a process that would allow for a more complete discussion of some of the underlying value issues linked to independent system-wide evaluation, for example:

- What role should independent system-wide evaluation play in the United Nations?
- What is its function?
- What are its goals?
- How should it be governed?
- How should priorities be set?

- What should it include and exclude?
- What do Member States want to accomplish with evaluation?
- What resources should the system invest in this function?
- What structures and mechanisms should be put in place to support the coherence of the function?
- What should their mandates be?
- What are the expectations in relation to independent system-wide evaluation and how should they be reported on and reviewed?

34. A review of fundamental values is the role of Member States and senior officials of the United Nations. Such a review can point the way but it cannot presuppose the values of the Organization. Discussions at the consultative workshop in October 2011 suggested that continuing dialogue on some of the most difficult value questions associated with independent system-wide evaluation would be the only way to move the agenda forward in the long term. The consultants agree with that position and thus recommend that the President of the General Assembly set up a working group of Member States to discuss the issues. The exact form and participation should be determined by the Assembly. It is suggested that those intergovernmental structures that have a particular interest in independent system-wide evaluation, for example the Economic and Social Council, and the Second and Fifth Committees of the General Assembly, be part of the working group.

35. Finally, it is suggested that the working group take up an issue that has been central to the United Nations discussion on independent system-wide evaluation but that has not yet been resolved, namely, what role the Joint Inspection Unit should play in the emerging evaluation function and how that role would affect the mandate and style of work of the Unit.

Recommendation 2: The Secretary-General should establish a process for strengthening the coordination of the existing independent system-wide evaluation activities in the United Nations system; an interim coordination mechanism in the form of a steering group should be tasked with managing the process

36. Many different types of collaboration are emerging around inter-agency and system-wide evaluations. The United Nations system regularly collaborates within countries (e.g. in "Delivering as one" and Haiti emergency relief), engages in multi-agency projects (e.g. the Iraq and Sudan funds), shares administrative procedures (e.g. in the area of medical insurance), works together on cross-cutting themes (e.g. AIDS and gender issues), operationalizes system-wide policy directives (e.g. on decentralization) and so forth. These require coordination and collaboration among and between agencies in order for an independent system-wide evaluation to take place, and all require some type of coordinating mechanism.

37. The existing system-wide evaluations will continue because an authorizing group (for example, from a fund, programme, inter-agency standing committee or the General Assembly) requests that they be carried out. In such an ad hoc system, an interim steering group should be formed and given responsibility for managing the process of improving coordination until such time as there is agreement on the form and mandate of a permanent coordinating mechanism.

38. The steering group could be mandated to inform senior management and Member States about annual independent system-wide evaluation activities and to advise on the planning and resourcing of evaluation. In addition, it could help the General Assembly better understand the totality of the planned and reported evaluation work, the limits of human and financial resources and the development of evaluation norms and standards, as well as providing technical guidance for evaluation units participating in, managing or conducting independent system-wide evaluation.

39. One of the first tasks of the steering group could be to define what type of work qualifies as independent system-wide evaluation. The terms of reference for the review suggest that the term "system-wide" be used only in the context of development activities. It is suggested that the General Assembly consider a broader definition, since an increasing proportion of United Nations activities fall outside of the development and humanitarian realm.

40. The following actions are proposed as the starting point in the development of the mandate of the steering group:

(a) To maintain a database on all internal and external independent system-wide evaluation activities;

(b) To work with the various evaluation units to develop a yearly overall list of planned evaluations;

(c) To respond to requests from the General Assembly and CEB regarding the best way to conduct independent system-wide evaluation using the existing institutional framework and capacities;

(d) To provide support to the General Assembly for engaging in evaluation work related to the role of the United Nations in international agreements;

(e) To identify institutional and capacity issues related to the conduct of independent system-wide evaluation, with special attention given to the capacity requirements of Member States that are asked to lead and/or participate in such evaluations;

(f) To provide the Assembly with an assessment of the resources being expended for evaluation activities;

(g) To make suggestions, where appropriate, on potential topics to guide a work programme for independent system-wide evaluation;

(h) To conduct an annual demand analysis based on data that exist in the system and to make recommendations with respect to the ways in which the United Nations can improve its understanding of the demand for independent system-wide evaluation;

(i) To provide an annual report on the state of independent system-wide evaluation in the United Nations.

41. The composition of the steering group should ultimately be determined by the United Nations. It is suggested that the reference group for the review be retained to serve as the steering group, with additional members to be added.

Recommendation 3: The Joint Inspection Unit should be supported in its ongoing efforts to improve its effectiveness and relevance as an independent system-wide evaluation mechanism; this support should include providing the Unit with the opportunity to test its ability to coordinate operational work related to evaluation

42. Over the past 40 years, the Joint Inspection Unit has played a role in independent system-wide evaluation in the United Nations. Its statute, written in 1978, identified a set of practices and principles that guide its work. The primary modus operandi of the Unit is for an inspector (or sometimes two), aided by staff, to conduct an evaluation. This is known as the "inspector approach". In this approach, each inspector carries out his or her own evaluation (subject to peer review), within the budgetary constraints of the Unit. Conversations with several inspectors and the Executive Secretary of the Unit indicate that they are open to exploring other approaches and methodologies that can utilize the Unit's experience but not necessarily its inspector approach.

43. To date, many changes have been suggested to the Joint Inspection Unit, and the Unit itself has made many suggestions for change. Some suggestions have been implemented, others not. Some require a change in the statute, for which there is a great deal of reluctance. The Joint Inspection Unit is contemplating a self-evaluation, as mentioned in its proposed strategic framework for 2014-2015 (A/67/6 (Prog. 27)). It is proposed that the Unit take this a step further and commission an independent review.

44. Discussions have indicated that both Joint Inspection Unit and United Nations staff have thought about improvement and are interested in figuring out new and innovative ways for engaging the Unit in independent system-wide evaluation. An example that was casually discussed concerns how the Unit could have played a more substantive role in "Delivering as one" evaluations. Conversations with Joint Inspection Unit and Department of Economic and Social Affairs officials suggest there is a new willingness to explore the use of the Unit as an implementer of such evaluations. Interviews with those involved in the "Delivering as one" evaluation suggested that it would have been more efficient to utilize the Joint Inspection Unit as a mechanism for the evaluation than to set up a separate ad hoc unit in the Department of Economic and Social Affairs. Changes in long-standing practices need to be planned and discussed before situations arise, and respectful dialogue, time and resources are required.

Recommendation 4: The United Nations system should take action to improve the quality of system-wide, policy-focused evaluations such as the quadrennial comprehensive policy review; as a starting point, the Secretary-General should commission an independent evaluation of the purpose, approach, credibility and usefulness of the review

45. Strategic and policy evaluations are among the tools required for the governance of the United Nations system and, given the issues confronting the United Nations as an organization, there is an emerging demand for more strategic or policy evaluations on a system-wide level. The Department of Economic and Social Affairs has a mandate to support policy development in the United Nations through its work on policy analysis. In addition, it engages in the evaluation of the strategic focuses (quadrennial comprehensive policy review evaluation) of the United Nations.

46. Throughout the interviews, it became clear that there was ambivalence with respect to the quadrennial comprehensive policy review process and the related report. Many questions, including whether the Department of Economic and Social Affairs should conduct the evaluation, even though it did not have an evaluation unit and what type of strategic or policy evaluation was warranted were raised as part of the review. As the issue was discussed along with the more general question of who should engage in United Nations policy evaluations, the conclusion was reached that the Member States should request the Secretary-General to commission a study exploring the methods being used to evaluate the implementation and results of policy decisions of the General Assembly and the Economic and Social Council. Along with that request, the Assembly should request a special review of the process for assessing the operational activities of the United Nations system and its contribution to development. Such a review would explore the purpose, approach, credibility and usefulness of the quadrennial comprehensive policy review as a case study. The lessons generated through the evaluation of the review could inform the United Nations system on what might be done to improve strategic and policy-level evaluations.

Recommendation 5: The Secretary-General should request the United Nations Evaluation Group to work with its members to develop specific standards, guidance and competencies associated with system-wide evaluation and should ensure that the necessary resources are made available to the Group to facilitate that work

47. The United Nations Evaluation Group has been a strong supporter of the United Nations endeavour to improve its evaluation capacity. Its efforts have led to a variety of guidelines and standards that have been adopted in various forms by its member groups. While its work to date has dealt primarily with individual evaluation units, it should be noted that system-wide evaluations are different. They are inherently larger and more complex and are often very costly. Ownership and utilization has been a problem as has, in some instances, the credibility of the work. While independence is often discussed as a necessary condition for engaging in system-wide evaluation, independence as discussed in this report is an elusive idea, and sometimes trade-offs must be made. In this context, a body such as the United Nations Evaluation Group is in a good position to make suggestions to the United Nations about the standards, guidelines and competencies required for independent system-wide evaluation work.

48. To facilitate this work, it is recommended that dedicated resources be made available through the Secretary-General for the United Nations Evaluation Group to carry out this task. The work of the Group would be submitted to the General Assembly by the Secretary-General for its approval. This would be a complement to recommendation 6.

Recommendation 6: The Secretary-General should update the evaluation guidelines for the United Nations and include special directives related to independent system-wide evaluation therein

Annex I

Response of the United Nations Evaluation Group to the comprehensive review of the existing institutional framework for system-wide evaluation of operational activities for development of the United Nations system

1. The United Nations Evaluation Group welcomes the study and agrees with the main findings related to the context for independent system-wide evaluation in the United Nations system, the existence of different understandings and mechanisms for system-wide evaluation and that demand for such evaluation is diverse but increasing, including at the global level, linked to the quadrennial comprehensive policy review of operational activities for development. The Group also agrees with the findings referring to the lack of an adequate conceptualization for a system-wide evaluation function, an inadequate institutional framework and insufficient capacities for independent system-wide evaluation, especially at the country level.

2. The Group has in the past responded to the existing demand for system-wide evaluation through the establishment of ad hoc arrangements to undertake evaluations of a systemic nature, such as the evaluability assessment of "Delivering as one" country pilots. The Group has learned from these experiences and gained understanding about the challenges as well as its own strengths and weaknesses to support this type of evaluation. As a professional association rather than a formal United Nations entity, the Group is not in a position to conduct or commission system-wide evaluations directly but will continue to provide advice and support.

3. The Group agrees with the 10 characteristics of good independent system-wide evaluation identified by the study on the basis of its norms and standards. Concurring with the points set out in paragraph 26 (h) and (i) of the summary report, the Group believes that good independent system-wide evaluation needs to be flexible and adapt to changing circumstances in the United Nations, while understanding that such evaluation is part of a larger system and that if it is strengthened, other components of the larger system need strengthening, including the evaluation capacity of the United Nations system at the country level and national statistical systems. The Group believes that strengthening independent system-wide evaluation should be approached in a pragmatic manner, building on existing structures.

4. With regard to the recommendations of the study, the Group would like to highlight the following elements. On recommendations 1 and 2, the Group considers it fundamental that Member States and the higher levels of authority of the United Nations engage in discussions on a future independent system-wide evaluation framework. The form of participation should be determined by the General Assembly with the involvement of the intergovernmental structures most relevant for this area, including the Economic and Social Council. The Group agrees with the proposal to enhance the role of the Joint Inspection Unit as the only existing independent system-wide evaluation mechanism at the present time, including its role in coordinating such evaluations. In order to carry out this role, however, the capacity of the Joint Inspection Unit for managing evaluations must be strengthened and its mode of operation adapted. The Group also agrees with recommendation 4 on the need to improve the quadrennial comprehensive policy review. While that review is not an evaluation, the evidence base of its analysis should be strengthened. Finally,

subject to further clarification of the evaluation function by Member States and senior authorities within the United Nations, the Group accepts recommendation 5 and will work on the development of standards, guidance and competencies for system-wide evaluation, including for joint evaluation. On recommendation 6, the Group could offer support to the Secretary-General in preparing updated evaluation guidelines.

5. Furthermore, the Group will undertake a number of initiatives to continue systemic strengthening of the evaluation function in the United Nations system. It will continue to promote the use of the norms and standards for evaluation in the United Nations system, including the consideration of system-wide issues. In addition, the Group will continue to serve as a network for the promotion and facilitation of joint evaluation work, lesson-sharing and identification of topics or areas amenable to system-wide evaluation. The Group will also contribute to fostering country-level evaluation capacities. Finally, it will strengthen the information base regarding the evaluation structures and capacity of its members, and will continue to promote the quality, credibility and use of evaluation in the United Nations system.

Annex II

Response of the Joint Inspection Unit to the comprehensive review of the existing institutional framework for system-wide evaluation of operational activities for development of the United Nations system

1. The Joint Inspection Unit (JIU) welcomes the report on independent system-wide evaluation mechanisms mandated by General Assembly resolution 64/289 and carried out by a team of two independent external consultants. The report appropriately reflects the current challenges of commissioning, funding, managing, undertaking and utilizing independent system-wide evaluations. JIU supports the report's conclusions that the existing subsystem mechanism should be continued with improvements. Thus a separate mechanism would not be warranted. JIU is furthermore convinced that a new entity would not by itself solve all the problems identified in the report.

2. JIU agrees with the team's main finding that, although it will not be easy to move independent system-wide evaluation forward owing to a number of issues, there is willingness in the United Nations system to have substantive discussions and dialogue on the issue. This confirms that there is a growing enabling environment for discussing system-wide evaluations and an opportunity for all key stakeholders to proactively contribute to the enhancement and use of independent system-wide evaluation. JIU, with nearly 40 years of experience in system-wide evaluations, looks forward to using its expertise and experience to support the implementation of the recommendations identified by the consultants.

Way forward and follow-up

3. JIU agrees with recommendation 1 and expresses its interest, given its role as a relevant subsidiary body of the General Assembly, to be part of the working group to be set up by the President of the Assembly. The review identified several areas which the working group would need to discuss.

4. JIU could bring to the table its concrete expertise in issues related to the role played by independent system-wide evaluation, governance, including priority-setting, follow-up mechanisms, resources needed and mandates.

5. JIU welcomes recommendation 2, to strengthen the existing mechanism in accordance with General Assembly resolution 64/289, paragraph 13. JIU believes that the location of the secretariat of the steering group should be carefully considered so as to ensure its effectiveness. It might be appropriate to request the secretariat of the United Nations Evaluation Group to initially facilitate the work of the group. The steering group should, among other tasks, capture information on demand for independent system-wide evaluations, analyse current prioritization, assess resource needs and coordinate evaluations across the system and report on them. JIU can contribute its knowledge to this endeavour and could assist in capturing the information across the system.

6. JIU fully welcomes the opportunity presented in recommendation 3 and is prepared to take the work on independent system-wide evaluation further and enhance its effectiveness, especially regarding its utilization and follow-up. JIU has already

begun work on implementing a new online follow-up system for its participating organizations to record, implement, track and report on the acceptance and implementation status of JIU recommendations. JIU is exploring other means of enhancing utilization by producing user-friendly products to accompany its evaluation reports. JIU is also open, as noted by the report, to exploring other working methods and utilizing existing capacity to coordinate, manage and undertake evaluations. However, JIU wishes to emphasize that it believes that the resources currently allocated to carrying out its programme of work are already limited, and any further work on evaluation would need to be accompanied by additional resources.

7. JIU sees recommendation 4 as an initial step in a series of reviews that will need to be undertaken to understand the status of evaluation work on the implementation and results of policy decisions made by the General Assembly and Economic and Social Council. As the independent evaluation on quadrennial comprehensive policy review would need to fit into a larger framework, JIU suggests that this be considered as part of the small working group to be set up in response to recommendation 1. The group should therefore also be tasked with discussing the bigger picture, namely, the issue of evaluation of the implementation of General Assembly and Economic and Social Council mandates and policies. If requested, JIU would furthermore be prepared to lead the proposed evaluation of the purpose, approach, credibility and usefulness of the quadrennial comprehensive policy review.

8. Regarding recommendation 5, through the United Nations Evaluation Group, JIU will share its experience to support the development of the standards, guidance and competencies associated with independent system-wide evaluation work. While it is only an observer of the Group, JIU would be willing to participate in any working group the United Nations Evaluation Group may set up for this purpose.

9. Regarding recommendation 6, JIU would endorse such directives and believes that the time has come to not only update the existing guidelines but also for the Secretary-General to exercise strong leadership in regard to the commissioning, application, use and follow-up of joint and system-wide evaluation work. In this context, it would be useful if the follow-up and implementation of system-wide evaluation recommendations were part and parcel of system-wide accountability frameworks.